

*January 13, 2019*

*Luke 3:15-22:   **“Heaven Opened”***

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In his book *Dying to Live*, Harold L. Senkbeil writes:

It all started at the Jordan. There the eccentric prophet John had set up his center of operations . . . *Confessing their sins, [people] were baptized by [John]*, Matthew records (3:6). So when Jesus stepped up for baptism, John objected. *I need to be baptized by you*, he said (3:14). And we know what John meant. After all, since Jesus had no sins of His own to confess, how could He qualify for John's baptism? Never mind, replied Jesus. He insisted that He be baptized anyway. *"It is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness,"* He responded (3:15). He wanted to take on our sin, you see. He insisted on bearing our guilt. For He was intent on dying our death.

Nowhere do we see this more powerfully displayed than in the words of our gospel lesson for this morning. St. Luke tells us that there was a voice that came from heaven saying of the one baptized, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." This was the voice of the Father, who is hidden from us all, but revealed in his one and only Son who became flesh, who is "the glory of God and the exact image of his being (Hebrews 1:3)." There isn't any other human being - past, present, or future - with whom the Father is pleased. We have all rebelled against God, and have brought nothing but death.

Still, a voice came from heaven. And this is a most blessed thing to consider! As Johannes Ylvisaker says, "That the heavens were opened is to show that the Spirit descends from God who is exalted over all created things, and also that the heavens, which were closed at the fall of man, have now been thrown open again over the man Jesus Christ and over all those whose intercessor He was. We may now sing: 'And I have found an open heaven.'" Without Jesus Christ, there remains a thick curtain between us and the holy place where the good God dwells and, with him, everything that is good. This barrier would have remained forever had it not been for Jesus Christ dying on the cross. We are told to behold in the gospel of Matthew that when Jesus cried out with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit (27:51-54):

the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!"

Consider the amazing parallels. In the Baptism of Jesus, the Father says "You are my beloved Son." At the death of our Savior, the centurion bears witness: "Truly this was the Son of God!" The gospel of Luke further adds that the centurion praised God by saying, "Certainly, this man was innocent," the sinless one. And, what was proclaimed in the Baptism of our Savior is now seen in the crucifixion: Jesus became sin for us! Also, heaven is ripped opened at the Baptism of Jesus. At the death of our Lord, the curtain blocking the presence of God is torn in two from top to bottom. Tombs are opened, dead believers rise and

are appearing to many other people. It had to be stunning! And as we look back, we can summarize the whole thing by simply observing in both the baptism and death of Jesus, we see **Heaven Opened!**

The whole thing is really mind blowing don't you think?! The sacrifice of Jesus "the lamb of God," as John the Baptist calls him (in another gospel account) has come to give the only thing that can finally be given to open heaven for us. He offers and gives himself. There are many who are deeply offended and even grossed out by the idea of a blood sacrifice on the cross and the eating and drinking of the body and blood of Christ. The truth is that in everyday, physical reality people give organs and donate blood all the time for others to receive in order to live. At the cross, not only is body given and blood shed for our physical life, but this body and blood is the very body and blood of the Son of God born in Bethlehem, baptized in the Jordan, and sacrificed at Golgotha. In the beginning, he offered and gave himself in the fruit of the tree of life in the garden and humankind said "no." He offered himself in his baptism as every sinner, and gives himself on the tree of cross to forgive sins and open up heaven. And now, he who has become sin for us and sacrificed himself on the cross is now a fruit to be eaten by sinners in the Sacrament of the Altar - that we may live forever!

We should not be surprised at these things, and yet sin so often dulls us. But these are great realities that we should not miss. God has chosen to give himself again through his one and only Son. The Word became flesh in order that we might know the heart of God. He loves us with an everlasting love and earnestly desires that we should have him in pure love without end. The will of God is that we would be saved and thereby experience what has been in the Triune God before the foundation of the world. Philip Melancthon writes:

The opening of the heavens that is specified here signifies that this man is the one who would come from heaven and would teach heavenly things, that is, he would show the will of his Father to heavenly people. Furthermore it signifies that he is the one who by his incarnation and blood would make unity between human things and heavenly things . . . it signifies that he is that same Christ who made for us free passage and recourse to the throne of his grace, because he broke open the gates of heaven for us (*An Ecclesiasticall Exposition upon Saint Matthewe 3*).

The connection between the birth of Jesus, the sign of his cloths and lying in a manger, his baptism with a baptism for sinners that he might become sin for us, the giving of himself in his body and blood at the Passover, and his sufferings and death on the cross are beyond amazing. He is truly "wonderful," as Isaiah says. The whole life of Jesus takes us to the opening of heaven for us through the forgiveness of sins at his baptism. All of it, and I mean all of it, was for us. Senkbeil goes on to relate:

And His baptism was not his own. It was ours. By His baptism in the Jordan Jesus took upon Himself the obligation of the sins of the world. There He took up His cross as realistically as when Pilate's soldiers laid a crossbeam on His shoulders. At the Jordan the sinless Son of God was made to be sin for us. The die was cast. His destination was sealed in the water of His baptism. At the Jordan, the Lord of life stepped heroically into death.

Those are astounding thoughts. His baptism was not his, but ours. The whole person and work of Christ is about us. In this way, we are on the pages of Scripture. His baptism is the source of our baptism. The signs and wonders are signs and wonders for us. The miracles are miracles for us. His sufferings are our sufferings, both physically and spiritually as he endured the death of a body like ours but also the pangs of our hell with an inner being like ours. His death meant the death of our death, and since death has died, there is nothing but his life for us to live, both now and forever! By carrying all of our sins, we are forgiven. No longer is there a great chasm between us and God. Rather, heaven is opened and we have the one who is good and the source of all good things. He who is good and the source of all good things has been given to us in our own baptisms. "Because Jesus was baptized for our salvation, we are baptized unto salvation in his name. Because He received the Spirit, He confers the Spirit upon us. Because He was and continued to be God's beloved Son, we become in Him the beloved children of God (Johannes Ylvisaker)."

How true it is then to say that what we see in the baptism of Jesus is the source of everything communicated to us in our baptisms. I have said it before and will say it again. In Baptism, we are given an identity. It is here that we understand who we really are as Jesus places his name on us. What is the content of his name is miraculously applied to us. All things we see in him are his gift. For now, we know this by faith, but one day we will see all of this with our own eyes. We live today knowing that heaven is open for us. We don't see it currently with our own eyes, but we are sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. These eyes of faith will one day give way to immortal eyes that will see God.

For now, we are left to think of our forefather in the faith Jacob. We are to realize as he came to realize in the certain place where he stayed for the night that, although he did not see it with his own eyes, there was nevertheless a ladder there. God showed it to him in a dream. Even as Jacob slept, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. The angels of God were ascending and descending on that ladder. And what was this ladder? In the New Testament, Jesus tells Nathaniel exactly what the ladder is. He says to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." We have that same ladder. We may not see it, but it is there. That ladder is Jesus. And in him we have found an open heaven!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott